

Experience Required: Navy Battle Stations Even

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Navy Photos by PH1 Michael Worner

With the help of technology, simulation and some of the entertainment industry's top creative minds, Recruit Training Command (RTC) is poised to make a quantum leap in the evolution of Battle Stations, the de facto final exam of the nine-week boot camp curriculum.

Assembled in an empty warehouse in 1997, with no small measure of plywood, sweat, make-shift plumbing, and old-fashioned Sailor ingenuity, Battle Stations has evolved gradually, yet considerably, from its humble beginnings. Nearing its fifth

anniversary, the 12-hour exercise pushes recruits to their physical, mental and emotional limits, requiring them to draw on every aspect of their training to date.

Thousands of today's fleet Sailors have its 12 events—and presumably its lessons—indelibly etched into their memories. Indeed, few ever will forget the emotional completion ceremony, during which recruits trade their recruit ball caps for those with “Navy” emblazoned across their fronts, the symbolic transition from recruit to Sailor.

Now, with the help of the world's leading experts in the entertainment industry, the Navy is working to make Battle Stations more realistic, more convincing, and even more unforgettable.

“Through the use of technology and simulation, we can take the scenarios we have in place today and create a more memorable experience, thereby increasing teaching value,” said RAdm. Ann Rondeau, Naval Training Center Great Lakes commander. “Our objective is to make Battle Stations a more effective training evolution. If we achieve that goal, we send a better-trained Sailor to the fleet—our primary customer—and that's what Great Lakes is all about.”

With that guidance, the Navy began work on the first phase of the project—creative development

Navy recruits are told their ship is heavily damaged and they must abandon it. They must jump into the pool and “buddy-up” into teams, then swim to a life raft and climb aboard without incident. The abandon-ship drill is only a part of Battle Stations during recruit training in Great Lakes. Battle Stations is the last major hurdle of Navy recruit training.



Navy Aims to Make More Unforgettable



A Navy recruit steps out of a smoke-filled space and prepares to help carry an “unconscious” shipmate to safety during the investigate and rescue portion of Battle Stations.

of a Battle Stations story line. Participants included training system development experts at the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division in Orlando, Fla., and i.d.e.a.s. (innovation, design, entertainment, art and storytelling) at Disney-MGM Studios.

“Our tasking was to create the Battle Stations experience in the form of a story, incorporating the scenarios which are taught today,” said Bob Allen, i.d.e.a.s. chief executive officer. “We are profes-

sional story tellers, and our aim is to have recruits so immersed in the Battle Stations story that it becomes real. Reality leads to what we call ‘experiential learning’—a very effective learning technique.”

Under the i.d.e.a.s. Battle Stations concept, recruits are marched to a pier, where they are dwarfed by a ship’s mast protruding through the roof of the Battle Stations facility. Bird calls, tug whistles, and other ambient noises of a busy port echo from speakers nearby. “Part of the Battle Stations experience is establishing the setting and building the expectation,” explained Marc Watson, a director with Universal Studios, who collaborated with i.d.e.a.s. on the initial phase of the project.



Recruits march through a tunnel to their next event. Battle Stations is an all-night evolution that tests recruits’ leadership and teamwork to save themselves and their ship. It is the last basic training hurdle prior to the Pass-in-Review ceremony.

A Navy recruit is overcome as she prepares to receive her Navy ballcap during the Battle Stations completion ceremony in July of 2001. She had been a Floyd County, Ind., police officer before joining the Navy. She attended Master-at-Arms training after recruit training, and now serves with a naval security force overseas.



Once aboard the Battle Stations ship, recruits go below to the mess decks to receive briefings on the night's mission. The scenarios then begin to unfold in a continuous sequence along the story line. Routine operations come first. Gear is stowed, stores are loaded, and, once complete, the order is passed to execute an emergency sortie—20 minutes to get the ship underway.

The aggression scenarios follow. General quarters is sounded. Recruits battle shipboard fires, repel terrorist boarders, move ammunition from a flooding magazine, and rescue injured shipmates from smoke-filled compartments.

But it is the exponential increase in realism that sets the new Battle Stations apart from the old. In the abandon-ship scenario, for example, wave machines, salt water, and night lighting will make the jump from the ship far more uninviting than the relative friendly environs of the combat pool used today.

"We have to maintain a 'suspension of disbelief' throughout the entire 12-hour evolution," said Allen. "It's imperative that we keep the stress level up, as well."

The Battle Stations project carries with it some interesting facility and contracting challenges.

"The Navy contracting system is set up to build facilities," explained Capt. Mark Samuels, com-

manding officer of Engineering Field Activity Midwest at Great Lakes. "In this case, we will be asking prospective contractors to build the experience, then build us a brick-and-mortar facility around that experience."

The design also has to be flexible to allow for modification or wholesale replacement of one or more scenarios in the future. "The new Battle Stations must be 'refreshable,'" said Rondeau. "We have a predictable customer in the fleet but not a predictive one. Ten years ago, anti-terrorism force protection was not as significant a part of our training curriculum as it is today. We need to anticipate what our training priorities will be 10 years from now and build in the flexibility to adapt to them."

In the end, while Battle Stations may change, the requirement for Sailors trained to perform in the fleet will not, a fact not lost on RAdm. Rondeau.

"We will evaluate our Battle Stations' return on investment, as we do the effectiveness of all our training programs, based on feedback from the fleet," said Capt. O. W. Wright, RTC commanding officer. "When a Sailor uses what he or she learned in boot camp to respond successfully to a crisis in the fleet, there is no better validation of our training." 🌀